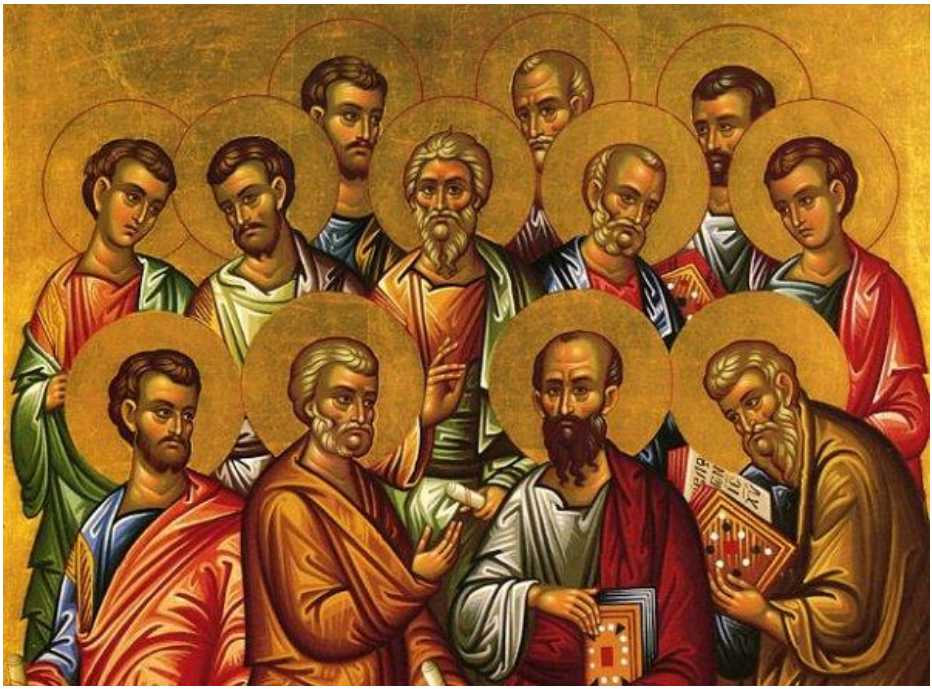
PATRISTIC *RESSOURCEMENT* IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE PRIESTHOOD



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I. Introduction

Recent years have seen a significant shift in how the people of God — both priests and lay faithful — have come to view the sacrament of holy orders, as well as the baptismal character of the common priesthood of all Christians. There are certainly many tributaries which feed into the main stream of this confusion, and not insignificant among them is the plan laid out by the documents of the Second Vatican Council for the laity to take on a larger role in the mission of the Church as a whole, and the new clarity set forth in the universal call to holiness for each member of the Body of Christ. It is ironically the clarity in this one area which has led to confusion in a much larger discussion. Taken by themselves, these are significant and positive developments in the life of the Church; however, when set against the traditional roles of the consecrated religious and the priest, they could be seen to blur the line between priest and people. Are they not meant to be radically different forms of Christian life? In this essay I will lay out an argument which contends that modern views of the priesthood are largely deficient, and this in turn has contributed to two major defects in the general understanding of the Christian mysteries: first, the role of the priest is largely underappreciated and misunderstood; second, the role the laity is meant to play in the life of the Church is similarly deficient precisely because of this widespread ignorance of the priest's role.

I argue that deepening our understanding of what the priesthood of Jesus Christ actually entails will lead not only to a development in the theology of the sacrament of holy orders, but will also necessarily contribute to a deeper understanding of the common priesthood of all believers in light of their baptismal character. First, I will survey the teaching of two patristic writers who contributed greatly to the Church's traditional teaching on holy orders: Gregory Nazianzen and John Chrysostom. Second, I will briefly discuss

recent trends in the theology of the priesthood, notably those which influenced and grew out of the discussion surrounding the Second Vatican Council in the twentieth century. Third, I will summarize the teaching of the Church on the common priesthood of the people of God as presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This method of investigation will make it clear that there is still much work to accomplish when it comes to implementing the received wisdom of the Church in these matters.

II. Patristic Sources

In a curious confluence of events, the two writers of the patristic era which we will here consider — Gregory Nazianzen and John Chrysostom — both treated of the priesthood most extensively when composing defenses of their initial refusal of the ministry: Gregory writing to defend himself when he fled from those attempting to ordain him, and John writing in the style of a dialogue with his dearest companion Basil, from whom he had hid when they were both to be ordained. We should not on this account think these men unworthy of the office, or as cowardly in the face of the prospect of public duty; far from it. In fact, it was their deep respect and piety for the role of the priest and his place in the divine economy of salvation that led to their hesitation to accept such a lofty gift.

Though both John and Gregory emphasize different aspects of what it means to be a priest, they share much in common, not least their conviction that to be called by God to ordination is a lofty gift which one should not take lightly. In humility, Gregory pleads his case: “I did not, nor do I now, think myself qualified to rule a flock or herd, or to have authority over the souls of men.”[1] Unconvinced that he could ever be worthy of such an office, he continues by noting that “in the case of a ruler or leader it is a fault not to attain to the highest possible excellence, and always make progress in goodness.”[2] With such a view of the office, his reticence is easily understood. John Chrysostom, on his part, takes a similar view of the gift of priesthood. When discovering that he was about to be “advanced to the dignity of the episcopate,” he relates that he was racked with anxiety, finding

within himself “nothing worthy of such an honor.”[3] Chrysostom, with typical acuity and elegance, argues that he is unworthy of the honor while simultaneously laying out his case that many have not properly understood the magnitude of the office:

> But when the priesthood is offered to me, which exceeds a kingdom as much as the spirit differs from the flesh, will anyone dare to accuse me of disdain. . . . For merely to imagine it possible for human nature to despise this dignity is an evidence against those who bring this charge of the estimate which they have formed of the office.[4]

Even in his day, then, the priesthood was misunderstood by many.

In addition to their common holy fear of the bestowal of this gift, in light of its great responsibility and calling, both Gregory and John also spill a great deal of ink striving to emphasize the great virtue and purity of life required by those called to the priesthood. Gregory’s description of the man who ought to be a priest almost borders on hyperbole:

> [H]e who has received this charge, not only needs to be free from evil, for evil is, in the eyes of most of those under his care, most disgraceful, but also to be eminent in good, according to the command, “Depart from evil and do good.” And he must not only wipe out the traces of vice from his soul, but also inscribe better ones, so as to outstrip men further in virtue than he is superior to them in dignity. He should know no limits in goodness of spiritual progress.[5]

The necessity for the priest to be free from vice is twofold: first, it is for the priest himself who must always remain in intimate communion with God; second, it is necessary in order that he provide an example in his own person of how those in his charge ought to act.

Chrysostom repeats the charge, and in many ways can be said to go even beyond Gregory in his estimation of the priest’s required sanctity. It is not simply enough for them to be good, but they must be the very best: “we must bring forward those who to a large extent surpass all others, and soar

as much above them in excellence of spirit as Saul overtopped the whole Hebrew nation in bodily stature."[6] The reason for this, of course, is not simply that he better than any others, but in order that he might be fully able to embody the example of Christ to the Church, being emptied of all that is not worthy of Him: "For the soul of the priest ought to be purer than the very sunbeams, in order that the Holy Spirit may not leave him desolate, in order that he may be able to say, 'Now I live, and yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me.'"[7] In contrast to the manner in which it is best for those most virtuous to lead the state — as in a true aristocracy — by which the people might more readily trust those who are best with earthly affairs, the priest is to be most excellent in order to more fully take on the character of the high priest Jesus Christ. Moral excellence and purity allows Christ to shine more brightly through the priest.

On the other hand, he must not be so elevated beyond the people that he becomes entirely unrelatable, and must be able to become all things to all:

> He too should be a many-sided man — I say many-sided, not unreal, nor yet fawning and hypocritical, but full of much freedom and assurance, and knowing how to adapt himself profitably, where the circumstances of the case require it, and to be both kind and severe, for it is not possible to treat all those under one's charge on one plan, since neither is it well for physicians to apply one course of treatment to all their sick.[8]

This image is a favorite of Chrysostom's, that of the physician. Many times Chrysostom will apply the analogy of medicine to the work which the priest must accomplish in caring for the individual members of his flock.

A physician must show a natural capacity for medicine, must be properly educated, and be able to study, diagnose, and treat a great variety of maladies in accord with the composition of the patient. In the same way, the priest must be able to treat the souls of his wards in a way that is analogical to the manner in which a doctor treats the body. In another place, he compares the priest to a surgeon, wielding the Word of God as an instrument of healing:

> There is but one method and way of healing appointed, after we have gone wrong, and that is the powerful application of the Word. This is the one instrument, the only diet, the finest atmosphere. This takes the place of medicine, cautery, and cutting, and if it be needful to sear and amputate . . . with this we both rouse the soul when it sleeps, and reduce it when it is inflamed; with this we cut off excesses, and fill up defects, and perform all manner of other operations which are requisite for the soul's health.[9]

The task of preaching is paramount to Chrysostom's theology of the priesthood: only by the preaching of the Word can the souls of the faithful be treated in such a way as to be healed. It is the divine character of Scripture which allows it to mold itself to the needs of both preacher and audience, being used to comfort one, upbraid another, and be the source of holy teaching to all.

The other image that Chrysostom uses to speak of the priesthood is that of the watchman, taken directly from the divinely instituted mission given to Ezekiel. The mission of the priest of Jesus Christ includes the aspect of warning the people of the grave peril which may perhaps befall them. The corollary to this analogy, however, is used to warn the one who would aspire to the priesthood as well. Quoting Ezekiel 33:6, he applies the dire warning the watchman receives if he fails to perform his duty: "For if when the sword comes, the watchman does not sound the trumpet to the people, nor give them a sign, and the sword come and take any man away, he indeed is taken away on account of his iniquity, but his blood will I require at the watchman's hands."[10] This note of warning is sounded throughout his treatise, and it is clearly one that deeply resounds with the saint.

In contrast to John Chrysostom's sustained use of imagery to illustrate and expound his deep grasp of priestly character and responsibility, Gregory of Nazianzen seems to eschew illustrations and instead simply rises to the matter at hand directly. The most significant contribution which Gregory makes to our understanding of holy orders is the fact that the priest is to be

a cause of deification. A bold statement indeed! Striking right at the heart of the matter, he speaks quite directly:

> The scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image; if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, to restore it, if ruined, to make Christ dwell in the heart by the Spirit. In short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon one who belongs to the heavenly host.[11]

In a word, it is the priest's mission to deify the Christian over whom he exercises authority. The authority and power which the priest receives to embark on this momentous task, however, is not a natural power but a direct result of his own progression in sanctity and proximity with Christ the high priest. As he notes, "a man must himself be cleansed before cleansing other, himself become wise that he may make others wise, become light, and then give light: draw near to God, and so bring others near."[12] In other words, Gregory simply states in similar words the old scholastic maxim, *nemo dat quod non habet*.

As a final point of contact between the two Fathers, both John and Gregory share a deep conviction that the priest is at the nexus of material and spiritual realities, engaging in spiritual combat and himself a participant in the invisible. "Who can mould, as clay figures are modeled in a single day, the defender of the truth?" asks Gregory. Going even further, he practically creates a tenth category in the hierarchy of angels: "Who is to take his stand with Angels, and give glory with Archangels, and cause the sacrifice to ascend to the altar on high and share the priesthood of Christ?"[13] It is this heavenly status which the priest enjoys while being an inhabitant of the earth which empowers him to elevate others, to "create inhabitants for the world above, and, greatest of all, be God, and make others to be God."[14] Gregory helps us see that the spiritual is always higher and of more importance than the material, and that the priest should be more aware of this than any; the lower should always be ordered to the higher, and by

nature of his gift the priest needs to be concerned with the spiritual at all times.

In the same vein as Gregory, Chrysostom views the role of the priest as quasi-angelic as well:

> For the priestly office is indeed discharged on earth, but it ranks amongst heavenly ordinances; and very naturally so: for neither man, nor angel, nor archangel, nor any other created power, but the Paraclete Himself, instituted this vocation, and persuaded men while still abiding in the flesh to represent the ministry of the angels. Wherefore the consecrated priest ought to be as pure as if he were standing in the heavens themselves in the midst of those powers. . . . For when you see the Lord sacrificed, and laid upon the altar, and the priest standing and praying over the victim, and all the worshippers empurpled with that precious blood, can you then think that you are still among men, and standing upon the earth? Are you not, on the contrary, straightway translated to heaven?[15]

While obviously not suggesting that the priest undergoes an ontological change to the point of becoming a different species of being, Chrysostom nevertheless considers the office of the priesthood to elevate the individual beyond that which is naturally his own. Since the priest is called to carry out a heavenly mission, he is called on to become as morally what he is sacramentally: his priestly character demands that his moral character be assimilated to it.

What is more, Chrysostom emphasizes not only the priest's angelic mission in the confection of the sacraments, but also his constant engagement with the powers of evil. Calling to mind St. Paul's declaration that the Christian is always at war with the principalities and powers, he asks: "Do you see the terrible multitude of enemies, and their fierce squadrons, not steel clad, but endued with a nature which is of itself an equivalent for a complete suit of armor."[16] As the priest is privileged to enjoy spiritual gifts, he must also, because of that, be prepared to deal with spiritual opposition, a reality which is all too often forgotten and ignored in the modern age. John and Gregory,

then, clearly both acknowledge the spiritual realities with which the priest must contend as well as those with which he has been gifted to receive and over which he has power. The modern view of the priest's role had been decidedly de-spiritualized.

III. Modern Construal of the Priesthood

When moving our focus to the last century of reflection on holy orders and the office of priesthood, we see a shift in the way that this great mystery is approached, both speculatively and practically. Briefly put, it seems that the modern view of the priest is one which fails to fully appreciate the great supernatural power and authority granted him by virtue of his sacramental character and conformity to Christ, and instead views him as either a counselor or mini-CEO whose main function is to oversee administrative tasks. Perhaps this is a misapplication and faulty understanding of the *ex opere operato* nature of the sacraments, where one could view the priests primarily through the lens of his authority to administer the sacraments validly and licitly, and nothing further. On the other hand, it could also be a side-effect of our modern preoccupation with efficiency, coupled with the relative dearth of priestly vocations, leading to the average parish priest assuming vastly more responsibility than is actually healthy or practical.

At the speculative level, this image also seems to be a theologically influenced one (if one can call poor theology by the name). Regrettably, Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, was a highly influential figure in twentieth-century Catholic theology, in large part due to his infamous work *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, first published in 1960, right on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. His own depiction of the priesthood is largely concerned with practical matters and the bare minimum of sacramental confection. Describing the manner in which grace is channeled through the Church, he mentions the "priestly hierarchy," which administers this grace primarily through "the administration of the sacraments, ecclesiastical preaching or authority to teach, and through pastoral government."[17] While not technically teaching anything that would

contradict the great teachings of the Fathers, the mode of understanding displays a sterility which can only be described as deficient.

In his own right, Herbert Vorgrimler takes an approach that we might describe as tangential to that of Schillibeeckx. While Schillibeeckx leans towards a view of the priesthood that is rather sterile and businesslike, Vorgrimler sees no problem with the laity usurping many duties traditionally associated with the person of the priest. Discussing solutions to the apparent shortage of priests in the modern era, he proposes that "both in the sacramental area (e.g., baptism, assisting at marriages, anointing the sick, preaching, blessing, and conducting funerals) and in the institutional field (in teaching, organization, etc.) priests will be replaced by other, non-priestly persons."[18] What else is this but to completely abandon the Catholic notion of priesthood in order to cater to a milquetoast ecumenism which leaves the priest with nought but Communion and Penance? Our patristic interlocutors would be horrified.

Now, taken in isolation, the common notions held between Schillibeeckx and Vorgrimler are not *per se* wrong — there is certainly nothing wrong with heightening our awareness of the importance of certain aspects of administration, government, or preaching — but problems seem to arise when any one particular emphasis is taken not as a part but as a whole. Furthermore, Vorgrimler's proposal that the role of the priest be (in a certain sense) usurped by members of the laity is even more problematic. We live in an age of hyper-efficiency, always attempting to discern a path to accomplishing the most (quantitatively) while allowing the actual quality of what is accomplished to suffer.

In an essay discussing the treatise of John Chrysostom currently under discussion, Henri de Lubac spoke so highly of it the he called it a "hymn to the grandeur of the Christian priesthood."[19] While perhaps he would not be completely dismissive of the positions taken up by Schillibeeckx and Vorgrimler, it does seem that he would criticize the narrowness of their views, and his understanding of Chrysostom's treatise would bolster his

claims. In his reading, John points out three essential characteristics of the priest of Jesus Christ: he is the shepherd of the flock, he is the agent of the divine mysteries, and he is the guardian of the Church's doctrine.[20] While de Lubac certainly points out the centrality of the priest's mission to preach (cf. 825), it is not only the service of the Word alone which constitutes the fullness of his character. To be an agent of the divine mysteries means to serve at the altar, to participate in the heavenly liturgy in which the priest participates and into which he draws others by the gift of his priesthood and place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Remarking on recent trends in both popular and academic circles, he is at pains to push back against any conception of the priesthood which would radically separate the priest's evangelical ministry (i.e., proclaiming the word) from his liturgical and sacrificial ministry (i.e., the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass and the other sacraments). De Lubac's opponents on this issue argue that this distinction is to be found all the way back in the fifth century, but de Lubac's point here is simple: a division of ministry in which these two aspects are separated is false, and we can see evidence of this in the writings of Chrysostom.[21] The cultic function of the priest is not somehow a late accretion to a primitive and pure notion of one who presides at the Eucharistic assembly. To the contrary, they are intimately united and the one compliments the other.

IV. The Common Priesthood of the People of God

Now it should be clear from our dialectical investigation that the patristic and modern views are rather at odds. The question we wish to ask here is this: how are we to assimilate the Church's teaching on the priesthood and apply it analogously in a manner that enriches our understanding of the common priesthood of all the baptized? If we were to proceed using only our modern authors, I propose that our understanding would be rather shallow and deficient. So, our goal is to distill the teaching of our patristic authors and

apply it to the modern magisterium's emphasis on the baptismal priesthood of the people of God in common. We will briefly survey the teaching as found in the *Catechism*, and then ask how they can be read in light of the teaching of the Fathers.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the grace of Baptism is described as follows: "Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte 'a new creature,' an adopted son of God, who has become a 'partaker of the divine nature,' member of Christ and coheir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit" (*CCC* 1265). In addition, and directly germane to our discussion, is the following teaching: "The baptized have become 'living stones' to be 'built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.' By Baptism they share in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission. . . . Baptism gives a share in the common priesthood to all believers" (*CCC* 1268). This common priesthood deputes the faithful to participate in Christian worship, the supreme act of Christ the high priest, and though priest and laity contribute differently to this one act and have different roles and responsibilities, they act in concert to offer the one sacrifice along with their own selves in sacrifice after the model of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, as those who represent Christ, they are bound to grow in virtue as much as possible. Since the faithful share in Christ's prophetic and royal mission, they are bound to this not only for their own sanctification but in order that others may be edified by their way of life as much as by their words. As the *Catechism* notes: "the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace — a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit" (*CCC* 1547). As those who share in Christ's priesthood by virtue of their sharing in his death, and his Spirit, they should not only be the cause of the salvation of others, but also of their sanctification and deification. In addition, in light of God's desire for all men to be saved, individual members of the Church have the Christian duty to diffuse this supreme good as widely as possible.

The teaching of the Fathers — Gregory Nazianzen and John Chrysostom — contributes to this understanding of the common priesthood in four distinct ways. First, it is paramount that each Christian recognize his or her own dignity as an adopted child of God. Changed forever by the grace of their Baptism, and called into a covenant relationship by God, they are forever the adopted children of God by grace and have a right to their heavenly inheritance. As such, their entire life should reflect this by enabling them to act in a manner appropriate to their family name, the name of Christ. Second, because of the gifts of the Holy Spirit who dwells in their hearts, they have an obligation to act as healers and sanctifiers when dealing with a broken world longing to be renewed, even when this longing goes unacknowledged, or is flatly denied. When the faithful can be lights in a darkened world, and can lead a life enlivened by the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love, it is impossible that they will not enact change and be the cause of many blessings to the world. God promised Abraham that he would one day be the father of a people by which all the nations of the world would bless themselves: the Christian Church is this people of God who are able to be a cause of blessing to all.

The final two ways in which the teaching of the Fathers can inform our understanding of this matter are interrelated. It seems obvious that there needs to be a renewed emphasis on the role of the laity to act prophetically by witnessing in word and deed to spiritual realities, and to acting as a sign of contradiction, calling others to conversion and a new life in Christ. Regardless of their individual callings in life — teacher, architect, homemaker, farmer — every Christian is able in some way to witness to the love of Jesus Christ which has entered their heart and transformed their life. As a result, the faithful are called to sanctify the world in whatever way suits their individual vocation and way of life; each will look different, but the duty is the same: to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth. Perhaps John Chrysostom sums up the matter best: “I am not myself able to believe that it is possible for one who has not labored for the salvation of his fellow

to be saved."[22] At it's core, this is the nature of the ministry carried out by both the ministerial and the common priesthood: the salvation of souls.

1. Gregory Nazianzen, "Oratio 2," in *NPNF* 2.7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Company: Verbum Edition), §9.
2. Nazianzen, "Oratio 2," §15.
3. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, in *NPNF* 1.9, ed. Schaff and Wace (Christian Literature Company: Verbum Edition), Book I, paragraph 6.
4. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, III.1.
5. Nazianzen, "Oratio 2," §14.
6. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, II.2.
7. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, VI.2.
8. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, VI.4.
9. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, IV.3.
10. See Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, VI.1.
11. Nazianzen, "Oratio 2," §22.
12. Nazianzen, "Oratio 2," §71.
13. Nazianzen, "Oratio 2," §73.

14. Nazianzen, “Oratio 2,” §73.
15. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, III.4.
16. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, II.2.
17. E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 52.
18. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 269.
19. Henri de Lubac, “Le Dialogue sur le Sacerdoce de saint Jean Chrysostome,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (1978): 822–31, 823.
20. Cf. de Lubac, “Le Dialogue,” 824–25.
21. Cf. de Lubac, “Le Dialogue,” 828.
22. Chrysostom, *Priesthood*, VI.10.